

DUTY FIRST

By [George F. Will](#)

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In Palestine in the 1930s, Jews with roots already planted there asked new arrivals, "Kommen Sie aus Überzeugung oder kommen Sie aus Deutschland?" -- do you come from conviction or from Germany? That is, are you drawn by Zionism or just -- "just"? -- driven by fear? That often was a distinction without a difference. A world without a national gathering of the Jewish people was intolerably dangerous.

There is no more stirring story than that of Israel's sense of nationhood, which endured from the sack of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. until fulfilled in 1948. Now after two millennia, after genocide, after 40 years and five wars and not a minute of peace, Israel is again being told that pliability is the secret of safety.

Why now? Because of thrown rocks and "world opinion," two things that, viewed against the sweep of Jewish experience, do not register high on the Richter scale of importance.

The Reagan administration says that in the missile age, territory is of diminished importance to security. Actually, the small antitank and anti-aircraft missiles that brought the missile age to the Middle East in 1973 make territory increasingly vital. From the West Bank, hand-held and other short-range missiles can hit all Israeli air bases and mobilization centers.

Since 1967, U.S. policy has called for Israel to (in President Ford's version of it) "dare to exchange the tangible for the intangible." The secure are forever exhorting Israel to run risks, which it has done. Israel gave up 91 percent of the land taken from aggressors in 1967 -- the Sinai -- in exchange for a chilly, mean-spirited "peace" with Egypt. Israel gave up, in addition to oil, two of its best fighter bases, thereby dangerously contracting its air-defense operations into an area vulnerable to hand-held missiles on the West Bank.

With Egypt, unlike the West Bank, there was a recognized international border to restore. The West Bank is part of the unallocated portion of the Palestine Mandate, the status of which is supposed to be settled in direct negotiations between Israel and Jordan. When, in the early 1950s, Jordan tried to annex the West Bank, not a single Arab nation recognized the annexation.

Candidate Reagan had it about right in 1980: "Israel and Jordan are the two Palestinian states envisioned and authorized by the United Nations," and Jordan and Israel are the parties to "settle the future of the unallocated territories."

In an "open letter" to Israeli Prime Minister Shamir, published this week in The New York Review of Books, seven Jewish intellectuals say: "You will, no doubt, insist that the Palestinians should satisfy their national hopes in Jordan, or by living as a minority in the undivided Israel -- but you once rejected the suggestion that the Jews

should live everywhere as a minority; you insisted in the 1940s that Jews were entitled to their own national self-expression."

But the stark fact is that Jordan is Palestine -- historically, geographically, ethnically. Palestinians are not living "everywhere as a minority." Today a large majority of the population of Jordan is Palestinian.

The seven Jewish intellectuals write to Shamir: "You will, no doubt, insist that you will not negotiate under the threat of violence -- but were you not once in the mid-1940s a young man who was willing to use violence to make the British negotiate an end to the Mandate in Palestine?" Yes, but he did not want the British to end Britain.

Shamir's first duty is not to mollify "world opinion" or tranquilize the American Jewish community, but to secure Israel's survival. That cannot be done within the 1967 borders. Within those borders -- which were denounced as illegitimate by all Arab powers -- the width of Israel's waist was the length of the drive from the Brooklyn Bridge to Kennedy Airport. It would take two days to move the Egyptian army into the Sinai, time enough for Israel to mobilize, but it is a two-hour tank drive from the Jordan River to Jerusalem.

The U.S. government, suffering another attack of the diplomatic fidgets, cannot leave bad enough alone. It cannot recognize that until Jordan's King Hussein, the least kingly king, causes Jordan to act like a sovereign nation, rather than an appendage of Arab conferences, and deals directly with Israel, the Arab-Israeli conflict is not a problem, it is just a mess.

The word "problem" suggests a solution. For now, there is none, and allowing rock-throwers to stampede the State Department into thinking it has one is a recipe for making a mess messier.

 0 Comments

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George F. Will writes a twice-weekly column on politics and domestic and foreign affairs. He began his column with The Post in 1974, and he received the Pulitzer Prize for commentary in 1977. [Follow](#) 

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